DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 429 873 SO 029 429

AUTHOR Miller, Dana L.; Creswell, John W.; Olander, Lisa
TITLE Writing and Retelling Multiple Ethnographic Tales of a Soup Kitchen for the Homeless.
PUB DATE 1998-04-00
NOTE 30p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (San Diego, CA, April 13-17, 1998).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cultural Context; *Descriptive Writing; Ethnography; Higher Education; *Homeless People; Qualitative Research; *Story Telling
IDENTIFIERS Narrative Text; *Retelling; *Soup Kitchens; Writing Contexts

ABSTRACT

An ethnographic study narrated three tales about a soup kitchen for the homeless and the near-homeless. To provide a cultural, ethnographic analysis, and share fieldwork experiences the study began with realist and confessional tales. These two tales emerged from the initial writing and presenting of the soup kitchen ethnography to qualitative research classes. As the study was shared with social justice researchers after leaving the field, a critical perspective emerged, leading to the reflective interrogation of the realist and confessional tales. The study's text describes how multiple ethnographic tales emerge and are further shaped by the retelling of the tales. Contains 2 figures and 35 references. (Author/BT)

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WRITING AND RETELLING MULTIPLE ETHNOGRAPHIC TALES OF A SOUP KITCHEN FOR THE HOMELESS

ED 429 873

by

Dana L. Miller
Doane College
303 N. 52nd Street
Lincoln, Nebraska, 68504
dmiller@unlinfo.unl.edu
Phone: (402) 466-4774
Fax: (402) 466-4228

John W. Creswell
303 Bancroft Hall
Educational Psychology
University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Lincoln, NE 68588
creswell@unlinfo.unl.edu

Lisa Olander
Research Associate
303 Bancroft Hall
University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Lincoln, NE 68588

SO 029 429

Dana L. Miller

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Presented at the American Educational Research Association (AERA) annual conference, San Diego, California, April 13-17, 1998

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Abstract

In this study we narrate three tales about a soup kitchen for the homeless and near-homeless. We begin with realist and confessional tales to provide a cultural, ethnographic analysis and share our fieldwork experiences. These two tales emerged from our initial writing and presenting our soup kitchen ethnography to qualitative research classes. As we shared our study with social justice researchers after leaving the field, a critical perspective emerged, leading us to interrogate our realist and confessional tales. This text describes how multiple ethnographic tales emerge and are further shaped by the retelling of the tales.

WRITING AND RETELLING MULTIPLE ETHNOGRAPHIC TALES OF A SOUP KITCHEN FOR THE HOMELESS

Volunteering was our way of giving back to the homeless who shared their stories with us, but from the beginning, our fieldwork experience was one of uncertainty. We knew we were entering uncharted territory, as outsiders, trying to gain an insider perspective. We were apprehensive at first about volunteering at the soup kitchen, about how guests would respond to us, and about how we would respond to them. We had never really known or interacted with homeless people. We knew the stereotypes of them as drunks, addicts, mental cases, and criminals, as characterized in movies and books. But after volunteering a few times, we were surprised that the guests were polite and gracious. We realized it was too easy to cling to the stereotypes and dismiss the homeless — perhaps so that we can rationalize our lack of compassion and assistance to them. In reality, we began to understand that men, women and children are homeless, sometimes because of bad luck and tragedy, illness, and a lack of friends, family or a support group to turn to. In the end, our narrative of a soup kitchen for the homeless and near homeless describes a cultural perspective, our field experiences, and ultimately lingering questions as we present several conflicting tales in the telling and retelling of this story.

The writing of an ethnography contains rhetorical structures that adhere to a balance between description, analysis, and interpretation (Wolcott, 1994) or a "thematic narrative" organized around a series of thematic units of fieldnotes, excerpts and analytic comments (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). At a broader level, ethnographers tell types of "tales," such as tales that differ by audience (Richardson, 1990), "thrice-told" tales of feminism, postmodernism and ethnographic responsibility (Wolf, 1992), and tales that incorporate different researcher perspectives (Van Maanen, 1988). Van Mannen (1988), for example, describes how researchers can tell stories through realist, confessional, and critical tales. The realist tale employs an impersonal point of view, conveying a concrete, scientific, and objective perspective. The

confessional tale focuses on the researcher's fieldwork experiences and methodological concerns, while the critical tale addresses larger social, political, symbolic, or economic issues.

This study presents our perspective on writing an ethnography using Van Mannen's (1988) realist, confessional, and critical types of tales. But our narrative is more than simply these three tales — we have found that another dimension has added to our understanding of a soup kitchen for the homeless: our multiple tales have been shaped by the **retelling** of the tale to different audiences (Mitchell & Charmaz, 1996). We initially wrote an ethnography to tell the realist tale of the soup kitchen, an objective account that had never been written, and one that presented a description and interpretation of one soup kitchen for the homeless. As we presented our realist tale to students in our qualitative research classes, the second tale emerged: our confessional tale about our fieldwork experiences. Those confessional stories took on a life of their own as we pondered issues such as how much of ourselves we brought to the study, concerns for our safety as researchers, and how to sketch out a study that would advocate for the homeless shelter as well as convey a good ethnography. Then we presented the study at a regional conference on social justice. Once again our study shifted, this time toward perplexing issues from a critical perspective, raising questions of situatedness, positionality, authenticity, investment, and voice. In the end, we have taken note of how the tale has shifted as a result of retelling it to different audiences, and we report here three tales written from our perspective of retelling them. The realist tale forms the primary body of the narrative and we embed our confessional tale in this narrative, *providing emphasis to it through italics*. We end with our critical tale, posed as questions as we interrogate our own narrative.

The Realist and Confessional Tales

For several years, scholars have explored the concerns and issues of the homeless population in the United States. Several studies address problems associated with this population, such as depression, alcoholism, schizophrenia and substance abuse (Bachrach, Santiago, Berren & Hannah, 1987; Johnson & Barrett, 1995; Johnson & Parsons, 1994; Parsons, Johnson & Barrett, 1993; Toro & Wall, 1991). Other studies explore the general assistance given to the homeless

population (Rogers-Dillon, 1995), and the myths and stereotypes people ascribe to this group of individuals (Mowbray, 1985; Ostrow, 1995). More specific studies examine sub-cultures of the homeless population and sites where these individuals congregate (Burt & Cohen, 1989; Dordick, 1996; Kramer & Barker, 1996).

One site that is explored to gain a better understanding of the homeless population is the soup kitchen, where individuals develop social groups and interact with others like themselves (Glasser, 1988; Glasser & Suroviak, 1988). Problems and issues surface both for the guests and for those who support the kitchen (Chaiklin, 1985; Kahn Hannah, Kirkland, Lesnik, Clemens, & Chatel, 1992; Muller, 1987; Schilling, 1992). A few studies address how these kitchens are run (Bowering, 1991; DiFazio, 1991), the extent of their use by the homeless or near-homeless (Thompson, Taren, Andersen, Casella, Lambert, Campbell, Frongillo, & Spicer, 1988), and issues related to volunteers in the operation of the soup kitchen (Holden, 1997). The soup kitchen becomes a microcosm for studying the homeless population (Glasser, 1988; Glasser & Suroviak, 1988), and we can learn much from an ethnographic study that explores alternative narratives about the culture of a soup kitchen.

In this realist tale we describe and interpret the cultural setting of the St. Tabor Soup Kitchen, located in a small Midwestern city called Midtown. St. Tabor is housed in a multi-purpose complex with Daily Refuge (a daytime shelter for the homeless and near homeless) and Community Thrift Shop. Three research questions emerged during our study: How might the soup kitchen, as a cultural setting, be described? How can we describe the cultural themes of the soup kitchen? How can we become advocates for the soup kitchen, day-shelter and the homeless population?

> *Though we entered the study with a goal in mind, we did not clearly conceptualize our research questions until well into the study. In particular, the third research question evolved during our work at the soup kitchen. Most traditional ethnographies provide in-depth cultural description and analysis, but action (or advocacy) may not be an outcome. For us, recognizing this need marked the beginning of the emergence of our*

critical tale. Every time we retell our tale we advocate for the soup kitchen and the homeless population.

Methods

An ethnographic study can detail stories of guests who are experiencing homelessness or near-homelessness. It can provide insight into how to study the homeless population and advocate for their needs. It can explore the cultural complexity of a soup kitchen that is interconnected to a day-shelter and thrift shop, offering multiple services for homeless guests. It can expose contradictions between reality and myths and stereotypes.

We observed homeless guests for four months during the noon lunch hour at St. Tabor Soup Kitchen. Our methodology was qualitative, involving ethnographic procedures (e.g., Fetterman, 1989; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Wolcott, 1994), and an evolving design to best understand the culture of the soup kitchen and the needs of the low-income and homeless population in Midtown.

Our over-arching goal was to write a "good" ethnography, in the spirit of an anthropological cultural analysis. We studied ethnographies and texts about ethnographies to see how they were composed. We soon discovered that there are many ways to do ethnography, from relying on firm guidelines for the research process to negotiating through the ambiguity of contested terrain in constructing such a study.

We chose a study setting that was unfamiliar to us — where we were complete strangers at the outset, acutely aware that our experiences would be shaped by our social and cultural backgrounds. We are white, middle-class, privileged, and sheltered individuals, and this background profoundly influences our perspectives. We sought reciprocity — to give back to the shelter and homeless population by serving meals during the noon lunch hour.

The noon lunch at St. Tabor was provided by Daily Refuge. Gaining access through the Director of Daily Refuge, we volunteered for four months, serving meals in the soup kitchen and helping with clean-up. Data collection consisted of 35 observations, and formal and informal interviews.

In addition, we collected documents describing the low-income population in the city, sign-in sheets that provided census data about guests, written materials about Daily Refuge, daily food menus, and took photographs of the facility, town and guests. Our personal fieldnotes included conversations with guests, volunteers and staff, our interpretations and personal reflections.

Key informants in the culture-sharing group included the Director of Daily Refuge, the facility manager, and a homeless man who volunteered as a cook for many days during our visit. With these individuals, we periodically shared our emerging cultural description of St. Tabor. Throughout the study, we verified the accuracy of our account by taking our report back to key informants and by triangulating among multiple participants, investigators, and data collection methods. We use pseudonyms throughout this report to protect the anonymity of the site and participants.

During the research process, we developed a cultural analysis of the soup kitchen, by describing the setting, identifying cultural themes including a taxonomy of volunteers (Spradley, 1979), and advancing our interpretation of behaviors, experiences, and apparent contradictions. Our visualization of the overall conceptualization and analysis of research is represented by a funnel-shaped picture (see Figure 1).

Insert Figure 1 approximately here

The Cultural Setting

Midtown is a small, Midwestern city of almost 200,000, with a predominately white (94.45%) population. Considering the relatively small size of the community, homeless individuals are often visible on the streets. At night, some stay at the city mission, others sleep on park benches, under bridges, on porches, in doorways, and with friends who have a bed. During the day, several gather at Daily Refuge, which opens its doors at 7:30 a.m.

St. Tabor soup kitchen is located in a complex that also houses Daily Refuge and Community Thrift Shop. It is only four blocks from downtown Midtown and two blocks from the central campus of a major university.

We gave considerable thought to how we might describe this complex. We wanted to create an image for readers by taking them on a walking tour around the building.

We were immediately impressed with the large, modern building, occupying almost one-quarter of a block, with the visible entrance to St. Tabor marked by a crisp green and white striped awning that covers a recessed doorway. This could be the entrance to a small business, not a homeless shelter and soup kitchen. Walking around the complex provides a contrasting picture, one less modern, more rundown. The day-shelter entrance is located beyond a tall chain-link gate, up a slightly inclining gravel drive, and past a weathered picnic table where "guests" congregate. Community Thrift Shop is located at the back of the complex and here the contrast with the rest of the facility is most striking. Piles of lumber, stacked appliances, disassembled bed frames, mattresses, and assorted carpet pieces litter the grounds, resembling a salvage yard.

Since Midtown has a city mission for overnight lodging, Daily Refuge was created in 1989 (originally funded by a local church as an outreach project) to provide a day-shelter for needy people. Its mission is to provide access to all people, no questions asked. The staff want guests to know that "this is a place they can come, without judgments. Everyone is welcome. For many, it is the only community they have, the only sense of home they have."

In a typical day, visitors might see guests playing cards, talking, sitting at picnic tables outside or sleeping in old stuffed chairs inside. Coffee is always on, and snacks (donuts, bagels, bread, peanut butter and jelly) are available all day. Guests also have access to bathrooms, a pay telephone, and washer and dryer. If funds can be raised, the day-shelter plans to build showers. In one corner is a small office shared by the executive director and the outreach coordinator. Its most significant feature may be the large glass window providing an unobstructed view of the guests. Daily Refuge has two full-time employees: Mary, the executive director, who is an ordained minister, and Rich, the facilities manager, who previously worked in drug and alcohol

rehabilitation facilities on the West coast. There is also one part-time outreach coordinator, Kathryn, who directly assists guests in finding and maintaining housing.

Down the hall toward the soup kitchen is the "cage," a floor to ceiling, locked cubicle housing miscellaneous food supplies and paper products. Just beyond the cage, a door opens to the St. Tabor Soup Kitchen (see Figure 2).

Insert Figure 2 approximately here

The Soup Kitchen, run by a Catholic church, provides dinner seven days a week and lunch on weekends. Daily Refuge rents the kitchen on weekdays to serve free lunches. St. Tabor's dining area is one modest sized room, about 45 X 30 feet. Guests sit around three rows of tables (2' X 24' each) covered with green, plastic, flannel-backed tablecloths with tiny paw prints. When not in use, chairs line one of the walls of the room. The dining area is modern and clean, with sparse accessories — a couple of trash cans, a small cross hanging on the wall, a bulletin board advertising services available to the homeless, and a few community service awards. A long serving counter divides the dining area from the kitchen — again a modern, clean cooking area with a stove, commercial size oven, microwave, stainless steel, locked refrigerator, dishwasher and mops and buckets for clean-up.

The guests who come to this soup kitchen are homeless, sometimes homeless, and low-income individuals. One fourth to one half are homeless. Few children are among the guests, and there are four to five times as many men as women. The guests represent varied ethnic backgrounds with slightly more Hispanics than others. They wear an assortment of clothes and their personal appearance varies from mangled, unbrushed hair, dirty faces and sometimes obvious physical disabilities to clean and well kept. The majority, though, are unkept and in torn clothing.

Cultural Themes

From our emerging description of the guests, their stories, the setting, and the patterns of behavior, we constructed a cultural analysis of the soup kitchen. We identified three cultural themes to gain a deeper understanding of this cultural site.

We entered the field with a few cultural themes to explore and looked for those themes typically used by anthropologists, recognizing "culture" as a broad, evasive concept, even among anthropologists.

Ritual in a typical noon lunch

The first of these themes was the rituals of patterned behavior exhibited during the noon lunch hour. Numerous scholars define ritual in various, even contradictory ways. Though no single definition has emerged, authors use ritual to characterize societies and to describe people's ways of life. Ritual has been viewed as a formalized and meaningful patterned social act (Winthrop, 1991), or as physical actions with words as optional or as arbitrary (Parkin, 1992). Goody (1977) describes ritual as a hierarchy of organized skills and processes that include formal, repetitive behavior. Some' (1993) believes that "we need ritual because it is an expression of the fact that we recognize the difficulty in creating a different and special kind of community. A community that doesn't have a ritual cannot exist" (p.71).

We discovered that the noon lunch ritual symbolically means different things to different people. Volunteers who cook, clean up and donate time are performing a ritual of service, giving of themselves and their resources to a unique community of individuals. For staff, providing the noon lunch is a ritual of structure — organizing a patterned procedure to feed fifty to ninety hungry people daily in an efficient, orderly fashion. For the homeless and near homeless guests, the noon lunch ritual means support and survival. It is the only place they can go, day after day, to get a free lunch (it is literally sustenance) and to find shelter from the elements.

There are preparatory rituals involved in the noon lunch hour. The facility manager types and posts the daily menu on the door and counter. Food is prepared and plates, plastic silverware, napkins, a sign-in sheet, hot pads, cups, coffee, and ice water are set out. Chairs are set at tables

by guests or volunteers. Some guests line up outside, and those who come from the day-shelter line up against the wall near the counter. Workers don plastic gloves and prepare to serve the food. The facility manager unlocks the outside entrance and lunch is served at the same time each day, 11:30 a.m.

Guests typically file through the line quietly; though some occasionally joke or argue with one another. They pick up napkins and plastic utensils and sign in. Most sign first names, some sign fictitious names: "Jesus Christ," "Animal," "Adolph Hitler," "Clint Eastwood," "Mickey Mouse." Although many guests are "regulars", a few are transients. Volunteers serve food assembly-line style, dishing up and handing plates to guests at the end of the line. Staff and regular volunteers verbally banter back and forth with some of the guests.

Most guests are respectful and others point, mumble or stare, and say little. Guests generally sit quietly and eat, some alone, others in small groups. When the noon hour is occasionally interrupted by guests who enter the facility inebriated, standard procedure is to call the police. The staff does not allow inebriated guests into the soup kitchen, and, if they enter, the facility manager escorts them outside.

When guests finish eating, they discard their dirty plates and cups at the front of the dining room. Some walk by and thank volunteers ("thank you", "the food was good today", "thanks, you made my children happy today"). About five minutes to twelve, guests begin to line up again. Like clockwork, "seconds" are called at noon. When first-timers enter after seconds have been called, they are immediately invited to the front of the line and served first. By twelve twenty, most guests have left the dining area.

At 12:30 the clean-up ritual begins. The outside doors are locked. Volunteers put leftovers away, wash and dry dishes and pots and pans, clean the counters, wash the tables, sweep and mop the floor and take out the trash. Often, guests are recruited to help with clean up (some of our best conversations with guests occurred during clean-up). Paper and plastic goods and the sign-in sheets are delivered back to the shelter and put away for another day.

We also observed patterns of behavior that did not conform to expected rituals of the noon lunch, including the unpredictability of the food supply, and the lack of a structured volunteer system. The unpredictability of the food supply may relate to limitations in funding, and, a recent decrease in donations. This impacts the quantity of food provided (i.e., whether there is enough) and the quality of food (i.e., whether balanced meals are provided). During our observations, we noted that on some days, when we ran out of food, we served cold leftovers (for example, cold spaghetti and cold pizza). And rarely did we serve fruit or milk. Carbohydrates seemed to be the staple, pasta, rice, breads, crackers, chips. However, guests seldom complained — they were grateful for the meal and they were never turned away.

The second pattern of non-ritual behavior was the lack of a system for noon lunch volunteers. With scarce funding and minimal staff there has been neither the time nor money to develop a coordinated volunteer program, so staff make do the best they can. Volunteers come and go. When there are not enough volunteers, the facility manager recruits guests to help, whom sometimes work for tobacco. But not all guests are willing and capable. This is unpredictable as well. As the number of guests continues to increase and needs expand, these issues may present problems in the future.

Outsider/Insider perspectives. The traffic through the soup kitchen consisted of more than the volunteers, staff, and guests. We wondered who were "outsiders" and "insiders" in this setting, and who comprised the culture-sharing group (Lofland & Lofland, 1995)? The lines blurred as we noted multiple groups with different perspectives frequenting this cultural setting (Stanfield, 1994). Slowly, some patterns emerged that enabled us to develop a taxonomy (Spradley, 1979) of people in the soup kitchen. This taxonomy represents our analysis of the second cultural theme: outsider/insider perspectives.

The Food Suppliers consisted of individual donors, church groups, businesses, restaurants, grocery stores, and the local food bank. They were often outsiders who delivered meals from churches or provided food from their freezers. Typically, these individuals delivered

food quickly, unloaded it, and left without talking or visiting with the volunteers, staff, or guests. A few church groups stayed and helped serve meals.

The Community Leaders were individuals who represented a community leadership program and volunteered to help serve food once or twice a year. They were outsiders, unfamiliar with the homeless and their needs, and uncomfortable trying to relate to them. We watched one community leader stare through a homeless man who was trying to have a conversation with him, reminding us that at times, the homeless are invisible. Another leader seemed perplexed, not knowing whether to serve a visibly inebriated guest. We witnessed shock on the faces of the city leaders who volunteered, dressed in their suits, clearly not prepared for the situation they encountered.

The Police physically stayed outside the soup kitchen, but their presence was felt as they queried guests about drinking and drugs on the sidewalk outside. Occasionally they loaded guests into their squad cars and hauled them away to the detoxification unit in the city. The police arrived because of 911 calls, made by Rich or one of the volunteers. Clearly, the police were not favorably received by the homeless, who discussed police harshness while guests were being questioned outside. Rather than providing a calming influence, the presence of police angered guests.

The Benevolent were volunteers who moved from being outsiders to insiders in the soup kitchen. They were kind individuals who wanted to serve the homeless. For example, we worked alongside one young African American man from "L.A.," a student at a nearby university. He came to the kitchen initially with Bible in hand to help serve lunch, because "all this reminded him of home." Another volunteer, Gwen, lived in a half-way house after fighting her way back from a life-threatening illness. She needed to "give back" to people who were less fortunate. Gwen saw the soup kitchen as a way to keep her own problems in perspective and spend time until she was able to get a "real job." A retired woman, Annie, who complained about her health and who had raised about a dozen foster kids also helped. Her daughter was homeless and sometimes visited the shelter. Annie sometimes ran the kitchen and served as chief cook, carried the keys, gruffly barked

out orders to other volunteers, and had a good heart. Nursing students and their instructors from a nearby college provided a foot clinic at the shelter twice a month. They set up their tables in the soup kitchen after the noon meal, washed guests' feet, and checked their overall health. The guests sat patiently with their feet in water, allowing the nurses and students to scrub their feet and check them over, and, when necessary, to issue them a new pair of shoes.

The Boundary Spanner was a Puerto Rican homeless man, Pedro, who cooked several days a week, knew many of the guests, always inspected the sign-in roster, and talked continuously about getting a job. He spanned the boundary from the outsiders to the insiders. He spoke Spanish to Hispanic guests, joked lightly with them, and gave friends extra food. Sometimes he took food from the kitchen to sell or give to his friends. As the self-designated foreman in the soup kitchen, Pedro kept the food line moving, translated when necessary, and often used his own six inch, sheathed boning knife ("my knife is sharper than any here") and small collection of worn pots and pans to cook.

The Auxiliary Workers were employed in the thrift shop attached to the soup kitchen and often took their lunches at St. Tabor. Two or three drifted in during the lunch hour, wandered into the kitchen to get ice, and regardless of the length of the food line, moved to the front. They did not stay to eat with guests, but took their food back to the store. Friendly and conversational with regular volunteers, they worked inside the multi-purpose complex, but remained outside the social interactions with homeless guests in the soup kitchen.

The Shelter Staff were insiders yet outsiders at Daily Refuge. Only Rich worked in the soup kitchen, frequently cooking and serving meals when there were not enough volunteers, procuring food, coordinating volunteers, mopping and sweeping the floor, escorting unruly guests out the door, visiting with police who arrived, and "keeping a lid on the place." Occasionally Mary and Kathryn came in to the soup kitchen for a meal, but mostly, when they were at Daily Refuge over the noon hour, their meals were delivered to them by volunteers. They spent the lunch hour watching "the front" (the Daily Refuge gathering area), attending meetings, working on proposals

for funding and tending to the needs of the homeless. All three staff were insiders to Daily Refuge but their roles in running the kitchen and participation in it varied.

We were The Researchers, who, for four months, volunteered three days a week over the noon hour, from approximately 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. As outsiders who moved slowly toward becoming insiders, we shared our research project with the staff of Daily Refuge, the volunteers in the kitchen and some guests. Each of us experienced St. Tabor differently and related closely to different staff, volunteers, and guests. The issue of safety provided some contradiction for us. We had varying degrees of concern for our safety, and had very different experiences, especially on those days when "it looked like someone had turned over a beer wagon", a phrase used by the facility manager.

> *"Is it safe here," one of us asked the shelter director after a couple of months at the soup kitchen. At times the soup kitchen seemed tranquil and quiet like a retirement home; at other times it reminded us of the television program ER, with everything at a frenzied pace and not enough staff and volunteers to meet the needs. We wondered: was safety a real issue, or contrived because of our prejudices and stereotypes of the homeless? Even the staff shared contradictary perspectives on safety. In five years, Mary had only felt threatened twice. Rich, on the other hand, expressed that his greatest concern was safety and security.*

Some days we felt pulled in too many directions — besides serving food, someone had to talk with the police, monitor the shelter "up front," and monitor the lunch room — all at the same time. Obnoxious drunks, people experiencing seizures, or high on drugs provided tense situations for us. To the end of our four month stay, we remained outsiders to this cultural setting but felt an ownership and a closeness to some of the guests and the stories that brought them to St. Tabor.

Stories. The third cultural theme that emerged during our analysis evolved from the stories told to us by guests at the soup kitchen. Stories told by individuals in a culture are often the only means of preserving the history of the group. Those stories paint a mental picture of what life is like for a group.

Guests' stories served as a conduit, connecting us to a greater understanding of their lives. The guests quickly became more to us than labels and statistics — they became real people. By retelling their stories from our fieldnotes, we hope to dispel some of the myths and stereotypes of the homeless and create a connection between our readers and the guests.

Michael was tall, bearded, with medium long, dark matted hair twisted in every direction, greasy hands and a dirty face. He was recruited by Rich to mop the floor and struck up a conversation with me as he poured his mop water. Michael talked coherently about a trip he took to Turkey after he graduated from college in the early seventies. Then he described a man in Turkey, "part of the FBI or CIA", who wanted Michael to loan him "a million dollars." Michael assured me that he would not do that, and related how "pissed off" the agent was that Michael had refused. As he rolled the mop and bucket to the dining area he continued talking — to anyone, and to no one. Michael referenced the government, and the pentagon, and continued talking. Rich, who overheard the conversation, questioned him, "are you sure all those things are accurate?" Michael nodded confidently. "I just wondered," said Rich, "You are kind of getting 'out there' with your talk about the CIA and FBI — kind of loose, almost delusional" and asked, "Are you supposed to be on medication?" Michael looked Rich squarely in the eye and replied with what seemed to be complete sincerity, "No, are you?" "No" Rich answered, as he reiterated his concern about Michael's grasp on reality. Shaking his head, Michael muttered that it was all true ... that it was all in his books and papers and that he would bring them the next day so that Rich could read them.

A young man seated at the first row of tables in the dining room remarked to **Dan**, who was standing over his table, "You're an attorney, right?..." and proceeded to ask him a question. Dan appeared to be in his late forties, with long, scraggly dark hair and a full beard. He was dressed in a black leather vest, black boots, and chains. Pedro, overhearing the comment, looked at me, moving his finger in a circular motion around his ear to reinforce his words: "That guy's crazy. He's full of shit." I have to admit, the young man's question caught my attention as I doubtfully glanced at this grubby man's attire. Pedro added, "He's always saying he's a lawyer, or running for congress". Then Pedro curled his index finger in front of my face and said, "Come

with me." I followed him to the small bulletin board by the kitchen entrance. My eyes focused on the letter and photo. This alleged "attorney" was one of two evening guests who had received letters announcing that due to "inappropriate behavior", they were no longer welcome in the dining facility, and that police would be called if they trespassed. After a fleeting moment of panic, then hesitation, I calmly asked Pedro, "Are we supposed to do something about this man?" Pedro assured me that Dan was not banned from Daily Refuge, so "Rich lets him come in for lunch." Perhaps more insightfully than he intended, Pedro shook his head and said, "people are always wanting to be what they're not."

Sarah was clean, dressed in slacks and a turtleneck, petite, with long, brown hair and glasses. She wasn't one of the regulars. As I was cleaning up, she asked if I knew where she could get work clothes. She had "moved here in the winter", she explained, and "brought a few winter clothes" with her. But now that it was getting warmer, she did not have anything to wear to work. Sarah was trying to get a job waitressing. She had moved here with her boyfriend, who was "supposed to be paying the bills", but lost his job. They had a place to live, but their electricity had been turned off. Their bills mounted. They lost their car. Sarah was on foot, hoping to get a bicycle for transportation to a job. Her most immediate concern was having something to wear, "just a few spring blouses". I led her to Mary, who immediately called to make an appointment for her with Job Outfitters at the YWCA. Mary also sent Sarah around back to Community Thrift Shop, and offered her a free voucher if she could find something suitable. Sarah was so grateful, and I was too ... I felt like I had played a small part in tossing a life raft to someone who was trying so hard not to go under.

Robert was recruited to clean the tables and mop the floor. He was tall, with medium length brown hair pulled back in a pony tail, with a ball cap pulled down close to his eyes. He had friendly, but sad eyes. Robert seemed much more interested in talking than in seriously cleaning. He had just gotten an apartment a few weeks ago — close by, because he "doesn't have a car anymore." Before that, in the dead of a frigid winter, he spent three homeless weeks, new in town, sleeping on a park bench down the street. I asked how he stayed warm, and he described how little

sleep he got, how he had to get up and walk around and go to the all night gas station/mini-market until they kicked him out.

Being homeless was " a new experience" for Robert. He was 52 years old, and had worked for 35 years — 12 in Oregon in Forestry. His wife divorced him and Robert said he "needed to get away", so he came to Midtown, a place he had visited once with her. He struggled to get money together for an apartment, and described how difficult it was to get startup money because he "needed $500 — one month's rent plus deposit." Robert was unable to work. He was collecting disability because they had replaced a crushed disk in his back with plastic. He was still recuperating. He explained, "I've got to get me a part-time job" but related that he had to be careful with his back, and had to be careful how much money he made, so he did not lose his disability check. Robert described his apartment: "It has a stove and an oven. I bought a TV from a guy for $10." That was all he had. "With my next paycheck" claimed Robert, "I'm going to get me a bed." I suggested that Robert stop around back; the Community Thrift Shop had just unloaded 12 mattresses — maybe they would have a bed. He reminded me that he could not do that, not until he got his next check. I saw him the next week, and the next — then one day he quietly announced, "I'm taking off tomorrow." "What" I asked? He had given up his apartment and when he got his disability check the next day, he was going to "catch a greyhound to Seattle." I asked if he would be starting over again, or if he had friends there and he said he would be starting over. He added, "there's just something about it (Seattle) — it keeps drawing me back." I told him to take care, and wished him the best. I realized that Robert seemed lost, and I hoped that he would find what he was looking for. With some sadness, I also realized just how transient this population is.

Cultural Rules

The process of retelling the realist and confessional tales has caused us to continually reflect on the lessons we learned about the soup kitchen and homeless guests. We saw culture-at-work, possibly in ways that outsiders might see coming to a setting where they are strangers. We framed several rules that seem to capture the contradiction of the soup kitchen and provide supporting

evidence to convey our learning. The rules reflect our inability to separate the soup kitchen and the day-shelter, because they were intricately entwined.

1. The soup kitchen depends on rituals to deliver services to a growing number of homeless individuals daily. However, in some of the most important areas, such as securing volunteers and procuring food, no rituals were in place. The shelter needs a system for recruiting and preparing volunteers to work with homeless guests, yet volunteers are almost as transient as the homeless guests who take their lunches at the soup kitchen. During our four months at the soup kitchen, we watched volunteers come and go, some obviously uncomfortable with the guests. We wondered if an orientation session would be useful to help volunteers working in the kitchen to relate better to the homeless population, know what to expect, and how to handle emergencies. A handbook or flier would be helpful, or a basic procedure guide for the noon lunch. Perhaps a volunteer coordinator could be hired to orient volunteers to the soup kitchen. A work program that would not only help staff become organized but provide daily servers would also give some income to guests who are willing to work, but can not find any other job. A volunteer handout for those people unfamiliar with the setting would save a lot of questions and confusion and maybe keep outside volunteers around longer.

2. Our expectation at the outset of the study was that we would come away with a greater understanding of the culture of the soup kitchen and homeless guests. In reality, our discoveries were much more complex. We learned about the diversity of the groups who were a part of this setting. We questioned who belonged in the setting — who were insiders, outsiders, boundary spanners — who had ownership in the soup kitchen. A deeper understanding of this cultural setting requires understanding the complexity of the roles of individuals and groups in this setting.

3. The stories told to us by guests did not necessarily fit the stereotypes we expected. Their stories spanned a continuum of reality, from fantasy and distortion to real life issues and struggles, such as finding work, clothing, transportation, and housing.

Though our intent was to study the culture of the soup kitchen, it was the guests and their stories that gave life to this study, and profoundly influenced us. We were constantly faced

with contradictions that made us uncomfortable. For example, serving guests cold, leftover pizza for lunch, then returing to our comfortable, middle class homes for the evening, throwing steaks on the grill for dinner.

4 Despite the importance of the shelter in the community, funding agencies are reluctant to support it. St. Tabor and Daily Refuge play a vital role in the community, as evidenced by the hundreds of guests the volunteers and staff serve monthly (in April alone, 1,329 weekday lunches were served, twice the amount served last year at that time). Yet, in many ways, explains Mary, the community has rejected Daily Refuge because "the guests are viewed as marginal people." Finding a building for the shelter "was difficult, no community wanted a homeless shelter." When the shelter closes for even a few hours, the complexion of the city changes — homeless guests, carrying their belongings in small plastic bags and wearing backpacks walk the streets and crouch in doorways — with literally no where else to go.

This homeless shelter provides sustenance and shelter to those who depend on it for their very survival — yet the shelter's day-to-day survival is precarious because it is underfunded. The facility survives on grants and donations but there have been months that the staff has come close to closing the doors because money ran low. Each year the number of homeless individuals in the city increases, while lately, Mary explained, "donations have decreased." If Daily Refuge closed, "where would guests go — would they take up residence on community streets, and in sheltered alleys and doorways?" one staff member asked. Ironically, year after year, the staff requests funding from the city, and to date, the city has rejected every request. Other organizations that have provided funding in the past are hesitant to allocate substantial increases.

Near the end of our fieldwork we attended a budget meeting with United Way to advocate for the needs of the homeless and increased funding for the shelter. As we wrote this analysis, we heard from the director of Daily Refuge that United Way had passed a preliminary review to double their gift to the shelter, only to be rescinded later.

Local fund-raisers to raise money and awareness should be organized. Guests badly need showers and bids were collected by the staff — but no funds are available. Food donations are needed,

especially organized food donations so that the soup kitchen does not have to survive only on the day-by-day hope that there will be enough to feed every person who walks through the door.

5. With increasing numbers of guests, the soup kitchen is understaffed. The staff who work with this homeless population require special skills to relate to them, juggle a multitude of responsibilities, and risk their personal safety daily, yet, they are underpaid and largely unappreciated because they have chosen to work with who many would consider, the "fringe of society." We grew to admire the staff who devoted their time to this soup kitchen. They were paid minimally, yet worked in a setting that few of us would enter for one day, let alone months and years. The work was a "ministry" to these staff, who had a personal vision and belief in helping others.

With the number of people who frequent the kitchen and shelter, two full-time staff and one part-time outreach coordinator are hardly enough. It is difficult, Mary explains, to be the administrator, do clerical work, be a counselor, write grant proposals, meet with agencies, and help guests manage their money, or search for jobs or housing. We identified the need for more staff — especially resource people, paid or unpaid, who could sit with guests over the noon hour, and help them by simply befriending them, or help them fill out paperwork or seek mental or health-related assistance. We admire the staff — remarkably, this skeletal staff meets people where they are. Yet, we raise the concern that much more needs to be done. How long can they continue their work, with increasing numbers of guests but declining resources? Daily Refuge and St. Tabor are needed in the community, but the community has not been supportive. In the end, if the staff close the doors, what will happen to the homeless and near-homeless individuals for whom the shelter and soup kitchen provide a vital lifeline?

6. The soup kitchen is not what it seems. As we reflect on the cultural description of the multi-purpose complex, the soup kitchen and the themes of ritual, insider/outsider perspectives, and stories, we are left with many contradictory feelings and findings. For example, the tidy, street side of the soup kitchen looks like the entrance to a small business. Around back, the unruly piles of junk resemble a salvage yard. St. Tabor's clean, modern soup kitchen contrasts with Daily

Refuge's old furniture and well-traveled floor. The soup kitchen is orderly but can suddenly erupt with chaos. Insider and outsider perspectives on St. Tabor may differ significantly. These lines blur as individuals sometimes represent both perspectives and shift over time. Perceptions range from comfort with the setting (staff) to unrest (volunteers, guests). Individuals' stories are sometimes make-believe and sometimes real. Some guests are well-kept, others wear rags. Most are polite and courteous, some stumble through the line, inebriated. The soup kitchen mostly seems safe, but we are constantly reminded of the possibility of danger.

7. The shelter's mission is to help, but in reality one difficult lesson is that some homeless individuals can not be helped. Day after day we heard guests talk about finding jobs. Most outsiders would encourage this — put the homeless to work — get them off the streets and off welfare. The more time we spent in this cultural setting, however, the more difficulty we had in discerning whether this was a realistic goal. Were guests sharing dreams, or delusions? Finding jobs for this population is problematic. We wondered, how many of them really wanted to work, and if they wanted to, how many were honestly capable? Many lack education and training. Some have alcohol and drug problems. Some have volatile tempers. Some simply can not fit in socially. Many carry their clothing in plastic bags, packs, or lock them in bus lockers. Some are unable to fill out job applications. If they can work, we wondered how many can keep a job, how many are capable of managing their money? And if they can not work, how will they continue to survive?

A Critical Tale

The **realist tale** emerged from our attempt to present an ethnography with detailed description of the soup kitchen, an analysis of cultural themes, and the identification of cultural rules that portrayed the culture-at-work at the soup kitchen. As we described this ethnography to graduate students in our qualitative research classes, our stories extended beyond the realist tale, to a discussion of our fieldwork experiences — the beginning of our **confessional** tale. The slides we presented to our classes drew us into detailed discussions about the guests and their plights. One of our classes even circulated a petition to donate money to the shelter and we delivered forty dollars.

We retold our realist and confessional tales to seminar participants at a social justice conference last June. The thirty participants represented a variety of ethnic backgrounds and research interests, from criminal justice, to sociology, to social work. As we narrated our slide show, participants interrupted to ask questions that drew us closer to the **critical tale**. From a critical theory perspective, participants challenged us to be reflexive, to position ourselves as researchers in the soup kitchen setting, and to consider what we received and gave back for our research efforts. From our reflections on the questions participants asked, our critical tale emerged. Those questions included:

• Did we have authentic access to the site? Did we gain permission from the homeless to study them? We asked for permission to study the site from the staff, but only after volunteering for a few weeks did we begin to explain to guests that we were conducting a research project. The guests freely told their stories to us. We offered to pay Pedro to share his story. We always asked permission to take photographs and respected guests who declined. But we did not get signed releases from guests to use their stories. We did not ask: may we use your story in our study?

• What equity existed in our study? How did we reciprocate and invest in the homeless for the stories we received? We volunteered three days a week, setting up the lunch, serving food, sweeping and mopping the floors and cleaning the kitchen. We donated food, money, furniture, and our time in an attempt to give back to guests. But after four months, when our study was completed, we left the shelter, only to return occasionally to greet our friends there or deliver a donation — returning us from the shelter and soup kitchen to our safe, middle class existence.

• How did we position ourselves in the study as researchers — the middle-class, white people from the University, who had never experienced homelessness (or taking meals at a free soup kitchen)? We were moved by our experiences at the soup kitchen and the connections we made with some of the guests, volunteers, and staff. With compassion we related our fieldwork stories, trying to give others a glimpse into the world of homelessness, trying to help others see beyond the stereotypes. We shared our concerns about safety, and our desire to become advocates for the homeless. Yet, we can not naively assume that we understand the homeless or that we have

accurately represented them. We interrogated our text mostly after we left the soup kitchen, without engaging the homeless as co-researchers or asking their help in shaping these tales.

• How did we know that we obtained accurate and truthful stories from the guests? We recorded the detail of conversations with guests, captured their words as closely as possible, and tried to emphasize their tone of expressions. But, just as the stories blurred a distinction between truth and fiction, who is to say that guests' stories would not change with their retelling, or that they could even recall the details of their stories that we recorded in our fieldnotes. The tone of the realist tale, and the emotion of our confessional tale, and even this critical tale are both accurate and suspect as we relate our stories of the soup kitchen.

Reflections about Writing and Retelling

This much is true — we learned important lessons from the writing **and** retelling of ethnographic tales. We began our study as a traditional ethnography. Our confessional tale emerged as we retold the realist tale to our classes. When we were challenged to interrogate our own text, the critical tale took shape. We could not ignore issues related to access, equity, positionality, investment, accuracy and the truth of the stories guests told to us.

One lesson is clear — research is not static over time. It shifts in important ways that should cause ethnographers to reflect on how they write and present their studies to different audiences. The retelling of an ethnography may be as important as the initial writing of it. In this case, retelling caused us to reexamine our biases, values, and core assumptions that we brought to the study. The retelling helped us gain a deeper perspective about the richness of the material from the soup kitchen, the people we studied, and ourselves in the setting. Retelling represents further analysis of our data, after we left the soup kitchen. We have also learned that writing and retelling cannot easily be separated in a study — the lines blur about the types of tales that can be told and how the audience might receive them. In the end, we have a more richly textured portrait of the cultural setting of the soup kitchen, developed through multiple layers of analysis and perspectives. And we open ourselves to other tales emerging as we retell this tale of the our experiences at a soup kitchen for the homeless.

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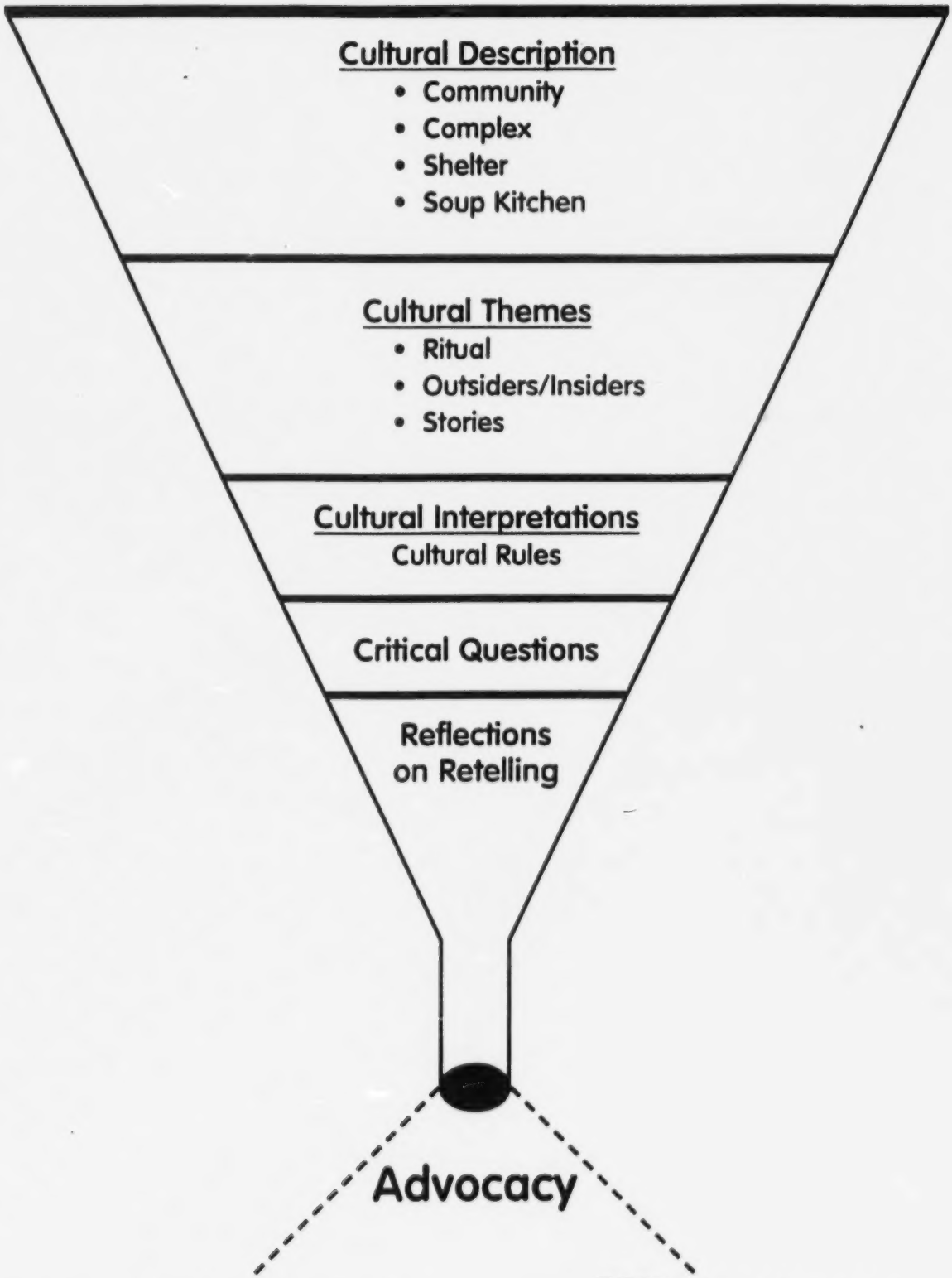

Figure 1. Shaping the Study

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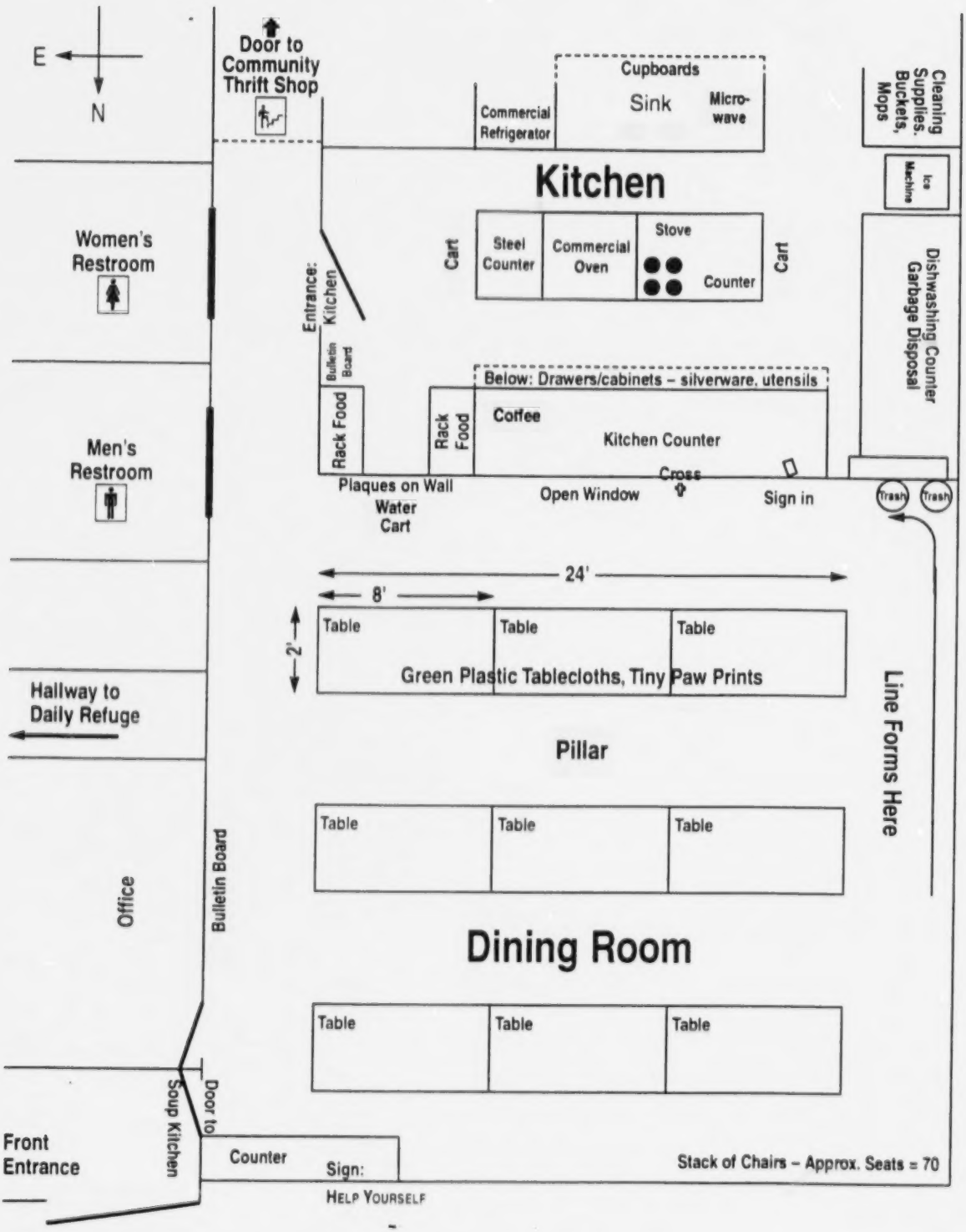

Figure 2. MAP – St. Tabor Soup Kitchen

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